The Inept, Insulting, Opportunistic Mark Lane

By GARRY WILLS

THE televised Army hearings revealed Joseph McCarthy for the blustering phony he was. The same kind of revelation took place when Mark Lane went before the House Assassinations Committee, a committee he had hoped to control, and one he denounced when he found it was independent — insulting because he could not steer, ruining where he could not rule, a McCarthy for our time.

Lane had the humorless gall to say the committee was engaged in headline hunting. This is the same Lane I observed in Chicago in 1968. He was accompanied by his own film crew at the Democratic National Convention. He would dash briefly into a tear-gassed area, then run back to the cameras and flop down in a theatrical pieta pose to be treated for the cameras.

I next encountered him when a group of antiwar demonstrators petitioned the House for redress of grievance — that is, for waging an unconstitutional war. There was some debate whether the presentation of that petition should take place in defiance of Capitol police orders to move from the door of the House.

LANE ADVISED THE demonstrators that civil disobedience should be committed. He added that he, of course, would not be available for jailing since he was the self-appointed lawyer for others getting collared.

Later, he visited those of us who were arrested, and advised us not to plead nolo contendere. We should ask for a trial — and, incidentally, for him as our trial lawyer, affording him more headlines. I had seen how he "represented" the estate of Lee Harvey Oswald, and knew that the last thing I ever wanted in the world was Mark Lane for a lawyer.

LANE HAS BEEN promoting himself in the wake of tragedy for a decade and a half. It was about time the nation got to know what a phony he is. I learned it in 1967.

At the time, I was writing a book with Ovid Demaris that covered, among other things, the Warren Commission's report. Lane devoted a whole chapter of his book on that report to "Nancy Perrin Rich," a woman of many names and identities and stories.

She knew literally everyone involved in the assassination, including the president himself and Mrs. Kennedy. She had told several of her stories to the commission, different stories using different names, all contradictory in themselves and to themselves, and one contradicted by the polygraph.

Lane gave only one of her stories, and that one cleaned up, mentioning (even so) details provably false: That Jack Ruby ever had a female bartender. Lane made the story look strong by omitting all references to the same woman's different testimony, bizarrer stories and troubled history.

The possibility remains that Lane was acting from ignorance — that he simply didn't know the body of material he was attacking, though any careful reader was bound to know it.

My colleague, Ovid Demaris, checked this possibility by trying to reach "Mrs. Rich." She was in a mental institution at the time, and her current husband said it would be unsettling to interview her. Demaris found, however, that Lane had spoken to the same man and revealed a knowledge of all the woman's troubles, her multiple identities and versions of history. The husband told Lane what was printed in our 1968 book: "I talked to Lane, and I asked him at the time of the interview what he thought of it, and he told me he didn't see how he could use any of it. Then that book comes out."

YOU CAN SEE why I found it amusing to watch Lane rant and rave in the hearing room about the publicity-oriented deceptions of House committee members. It is a subject — perhaps the only subject — where Lane has expertise; but an expertise that proclaims its own incompetence.

As with McCarthy, exposure to him is the best antidote to him. Not even Joe McCarthy could best Mark Lane at omnidirectional accusations based on nothing.